Fate's Feathers

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Fate's Feathers

by FeatherLumina

Summary

Three friends dine before battle.

One generously hosts. One tries to make amends.

The one that is left… becomes a monster.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

A delightful cascade of steam escaped as Angeal opened the oven, enveloping the kitchen with the comforting scent of herbs, spices and caramelising vegetables. As he turned the potatoes, he fervently prayed to whatever deity would listen that, much like the roast, this evening would help Genesis and Sephiroth 'blow off some steam' and sort themselves out before the demands of war separated them again.

It had been weeks after the training room 'incident', and despite Angeal attempting to patch things up with both Firsts individually, the rift between Genesis and Sephiroth remained.

A one-sided rift that seemed entirely perpetuated by his fiery childhood friend, but still.

Despite this, Sephiroth remained apologetic and grief-stricken, lamenting to Angeal about his numerous attempts to work things out with Genesis during the past few weeks.

With a heavy sigh, Angeal closed the oven door and wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead. All three Firsts were currently on standby for deployment to Wutai at a moment's notice, and *gods damn it,* he wanted each of them on better terms before duty could interrupt. They were the company's finest warriors, of course, but even then—they could *die.* Accidents happened. On the battlefield, during recon, *or* on a simulated mako cannon.

If this dinner didn't bring them together, Angeal would have to get creative.

Little did he know that fate might do that for him.

Some half an hour later, Angeal had his head in the cupboard for plates. However, a rapid gust of air followed by a loud bang nearly startled him into a head injury involving cabinetry.

"*My friend, the fates are cruel!"* Genesis lamented loudly as he swaggered into the apartment, the door slamming behind him. "*There are no dreams…"* he continued, mumbling with irritation as he fiddled with the cap of a dumbapple cider bottle, "*…no honour-*" the redhead grunted, finally popping the lid, "*-remains."*

"Gee, thanks for knocking!" Angeal called back with a mix of frustration and amusement. He steadied himself and finished gathering everything needed to set the dining table. Once done, he

looked over to see Genesis lounging luxuriously all over his sofa, the cider bottle to his lips.

"*The arrow has left…the bow of the goddess…"* Genesis replied between gulps before releasing a pent-up sigh and melting into the cushions. Without a care, he adjusted his legs, and nearly knocked one of Angeal's beloved houseplants from the coffee table.

"Watch your legs, your *majesty,*" Angeal scolded, moving to adjust the pot so it wasn't so near Genesis' boots. "You're lucky I've only got a table to set, or I'd get your ass on dishwasher duty."

"Oh *my*, someone's crass today," Genesis huffed, taking another sip. "I thought you liked cooking for us."

"I *do*," Angeal remarked over his shoulder as he returned to gather the tableware. "I just like it when my guests *appreciate* it. And don't try to annihilate my leafy friends."

A firm yet polite knock on the door made Angeal pause briefly as he set down plates. "Come in!"

"Evening, Angeal," Sephiroth nodded as he stepped inside, before turning to see his other friend. "Genesis."

"Seph, you look exhausted," Angeal murmured, touching the man's shoulder gently. "Are you alright?"

Sephiroth shrugged nonchalantly. "I will be." He gingerly made his way to a vacant armchair opposite Genesis and sank into it, unable to disguise his relief.

"Cider?" Genesis offered with the forced hint of a smile.

The General stared at the offered beverage for a few seconds, but eventually decided against it. "No, thank you. I've spent *a long* day in the labs having mako treatments and that, combined with alcohol, is not a good mix."

The redhead stifled an irritated sigh and placed the offered bottle of cider down with a heavy *thunk*. "Why do those blasted scientists think you're so goddamn *special* that they need to tinker for an entire *day?"*

"*Genesis,*" Angeal hissed, gritting his teeth. "Don't start."

"Don't ask me..." Sephiroth replied, his exhaustion evident as he

slumped down further, "...ask *them*."

Genesis shot the famous First a dark look laced with frustration, but he didn't press the matter further. Instead, he fumbled around in his coat pocket for LOVELESS with his left hand, but the flinch of discomfort as he did so was not lost on either Angeal or Sephiroth.

SOLDIERs of their calibre rarely took more than a few days to heal from major injuries, provided curative materia was administered promptly. The fact that Genesis was *still* showing signs of shoulder discomfort after *three weeks*… both Angeal and Sephiroth knew better than to prod the man too much, lest they wound his pride further, but still. There was slow healing, and then there was…whatever *this* was. It was hard *not* to be concerned for the fiery commander, especially given their Wutai war standby status.

A silence that might be considered awkward settled the room as Angeal quickly finished setting the table. In pride of place was a whole roast chicken, seasoned to perfection, surrounded by a delicious selection of vegetables, as well as a variety of sauces and gravy. A homely feast fit for the finest of friends.

"Alright, folks, come and get it," Angeal called, clapping his hands twice. "Being both chef and host has left me starving."

Genesis was the first to pull up a seat. As he did, he breathed in deeply and found himself caught in the memory of the same dish being served in the Hewley's little house years prior by Angeal's mother. The spice mix was exactly as he remembered, and for a moment, his mood lightened. He tapped Angeal's arm in affection. "Smells just like home, old friend."

"I remember when a roast like this was for special occasions only," Angeal mused, a wistful smile on his face. "Though, I suppose it still is, given I don't do them nearly as often as I'd like."

"Indeed," Sephiroth agreed as he took his place, "this trumps any of the meals provided by ShinRa, that's for certain. Please indulge your cooking urges more often."

Angeal chuckled lightly and began to dish up. "I would if my hands weren't so full, what with mentorship and handling *this one* filling up my time." He playfully nudged Genesis.

The redhead, meanwhile, now seemed a million miles away, his expression darkening as his gaze slowly drifted away from the food

before him. Unfortunately, what started as a pleasant memory had now twisted into something far more grim.

Oh yes, Angeal's mother used to make roasts exactly like this.

She also made a lot of…*other things*.

Genetically *modified* things.

People. Monsters. *Him.*

"-Gaia to Genesis?"

Genesis blinked rapidly, reacting to the concerned hand waving in front of his face. He batted it away with irritation and reached for the potatoes. He might as well get *some* enjoyment from Gillian's 'creativity' before he left them all behind.

Angeal gave him a curious glance between bites of roast carrot. "Didn't think you'd take that little jab lying down, Gen. You alright?"

"I'm *fine,*" he hissed, aggressively slicing through roast chicken with his knife. He began to wonder how obvious a lie that was, and almost thought he was off the hook before Angeal put down his fork again and pinned him with a worried expression.

"I saw you flinch earlier," Angeal gently probed. "When you started reading."

Genesis said nothing, his lips forming a thin line of displeasure as he set down his cutlery.

"Are you sure you're fit for active duty? We could be called to Wutai any day now." Sephiroth's question, despite harbouring nothing but kind intentions, felt like another sword ripping through the red commander's shoulder.

Genesis slammed a white-knuckled fist into the table as glared at them both, his lips forming into a snarl. "I have medical clearance straight from Hollander himself. I'm ready to grace any battlefield as a *hero.*"

Sephiroth raised his hands in a gesture of deference. "Understood, understood. If we're fortunate and are sent together, I'll make sure the media hears about your victories."

"Oh, *will you?*" Genesis scoffed, sarcasm dripping from his voice. In moments, the chair behind him clattered backwards as he stood and

thrust both palms into the table to loom over his rival. “What, you think I can’t make a name for myself without *your help?*”

Angeal glanced between the pair with worry. Sephiroth was being perfectly reasonable—usually, even *Genesis* could pick up on this. *What the hell is up with him?*

“Please, Genesis,” he pleaded, gently encouraging his childhood friend to sit down. “Let’s just enjoy ourselves tonight. Forget about work for a bit.”

For a moment or two, Genesis remained locked in place, an obvious grimace of discomfort contorting his face. He shook his head to try and dispel the pain before roughly bringing the chair closer to sit down again.

“I apologise. I didn’t mean any disrespect,” Sephiroth offered, voice quiet.

Genesis merely waved a hand dismissively and busied himself with seizing another mouthful of potato. Crisis seemingly abated, Angeal released a long-suffering sigh and tried to enjoy what remained on his plate.

However, as the meal continued, the ‘crisis’ had merely retreated inside the redhead’s mind.

And body.

His shoulder, specifically.

During his emotional outburst, a deep, pulsing ache had settled around his left side, radiating from his stagnant injury and engulfing his entire back.

Alas, this agony was no stranger. Flare-ups like this had been building in frequency since the initial injury, and just a week ago, had culminated in a grotesque ‘incident’ Genesis had absolutely no desire to remember.

Hollander better cure this damned ‘degradation’, or I’ll have his head, the redhead cursed to himself as he clenched his teeth through another throb of pain. *And in the meantime… ShinRa will scream.*

As he finished the last of his meal, Genesis closed a hand around his glass of water, intending to continuously sip as a means of distraction

until he could leave for the safety of his own quarters.

Suddenly, a jolt of agony twisted through his back muscles.

His grip, once reasonable, tightened dramatically, and the glass shattered in his hands.

“Holy *shi-”*

“Genesis, are you okay!?”

Angeal and Sephiroth’s words didn’t reach Genesis’ ears. The sound of his own laboured breathing and howls of pain almost drowned them out entirely.

Oh *goddess-*

It- it was happening *again-*

No no no- not in front of them- can’t let them see-

In several haphazard motions, Genesis shoved his chair away and began stumbling vaguely in the direction of the apartment door, hunched over with trembling hands clutching his left shoulder.

Around him, the desperate voices of his companions barely filtered in as he staggered away from them.

“Where are you going!?”

“Seph, *shit-* we need a ShinRa medic in here-”

Angeal’s last few words pierced through the agony, and Genesis whirled to face them, mako eyes flashing with terror. “No- *don’t-*”, he started, unsteady as he stepped backwards, “I just need- need *to leave-* have to *go-*”

Before he could finish his pleas, Genesis lurched forward, a sickening bone-breaking *crack* spasming through his injured shoulder.

Sephiroth went ghostly pale and Angeal’s jaw nearly fell off at the split-second sight of a pulsing *something* pushing against red leather. *What the fu-*

Whoosh!

Genesis released an ungodly, agonised scream, and moments later, the

hallway was shrouded in black.

Potted plants smashed against the floor, soil mixing with blood and an unspeakably strange, purplish substance that shimmered in the overhead lights.

Angeal steadied himself from the initial shock, but almost lost his dinner from the sight before him.

A giant, jagged wing flared against the wall.

Stranger still, it seemed to be… attached to Genesis.

At the shoulder, directly below his *injury*.

"Oh *fuck,*" he whispered, covering his mouth instinctively. Sephiroth looked at him incredulously, his eyebrows nearly reaching his hairline. Whether that was from the chaos before him or Angeal's unusual use of language, it wasn't entirely clear.

After composing themselves, both SOLDIERs rushed to their comrade's side.

"Hey, hey- Gen- buddy- you with us?"

Genesis didn't respond to Angeal; he could barely focus on anything other than the throbbing of his back, the ringing in his ears and the panicked stream of thoughts that everything—his plans, his cure, his *life*—was over. It was too late. They *knew*. It had to stay secret. Hollander would never heal him now. *He was going to die.*

Desperate, Angeal knelt down beside Genesis, who was curled in on his knees, and tried to pry his trembling hands away from his face.

He was met with a wide-eyed stare, filled with tearful horror he'd never seen on his friend's face before.

What in Gaia's name was going on here? People- *SOLDIERs*- didn't just sprout *wings- how!?*

Sephiroth's voice, heightened with unusual urgency and emotion, cut through the chaos. "Did the science department do this to you?"

Genesis remained too shell-shocked to answer. All he could do was curl in tighter, his hands returning to cover his face. His entire body began to shudder as hyperventilation took hold.

With a deep, shaky breath, Angeal tried to steady himself and began assessing Genesis for additional injuries. His left shoulder was drenched in crimson from the feathered eruption, but apart from that and the pre-existing injury, he looked intact.

“Sephiroth,” Angeal commanded, his medical training finally kicking in, “head to the cupboard near the bathroom and grab as many towels as you can. We need to stop the bleeding.”

The General swept into action and made a beeline for said location. At the same time, the green glow of a mastered healing materia radiated from one of his bracers as he channelled Curaga after Curaga towards Genesis.

“Gen, we’re here for you. Whatever this is, we’ll figure it out,” Angeal whispered, doing his best to comfort the other as he carefully applied pressure on either side of the wing-to-shoulder joint. Genesis released a low, pain-filled moan as Angeal pushed his hands down, his entire body tensing with discomfort.

Moments later, Sephiroth returned, and both SOLDIERs worked healing materia in tandem with pressure applied from the towels. Only with both their mana-filled efforts did the bleeding finally subside, reducing to a slow, patchy ooze of clotted blood mixed with something purple.

“Stay with him for a sec—need the med kit and some water,” Angeal noted, already on his feet and moving in search of supplies.

“Of course,” Sephiroth replied softly, a hollowness to his voice. Unflappable as he was on the battlefield, seeing the absurdity of a human with a wing erupt out of nowhere was doing a number on the General’s mind. He *knew* that Research & Development worked in less than ethical ways, but to do this to a *First Class SOLDIER*? Sephiroth was the resident guinea pig for the team, especially Hojo, but he’d never been subject to anything quite as monstrous as this before. Then again, there wasn’t a chance they’d risk unpredictable experiments on their ‘perfect weapon’…

“Genesis, talk to me,” Sephiroth pleaded, trying to get a look at the redhead’s face. Instead, the General was met with a clumsy hand attempting to push him away, and inexplicably, Genesis began staggering to his feet. Sephiroth instinctively ducked as the wing brushed past him, damp feathers sliding together as Genesis attempted to fold the extra appendage.

Escape- have to leave…

Genesis drunkenly turned around, barely catching himself on the wall as he sought out the front door.

…need to run…get out…

“Easy there, SOLDIER,” Sephiroth chastised, carefully restraining the man. “Don’t move.”

“Genesis, hold up! You can’t leave, let alone *walk,* in a state like this!” Angeal’s panicked voice appeared in the hallway again, his hands laden with first aid supplies. He dumped them on the kitchen bench and hurried over to Sephiroth. Together, they slowly encouraged a protesting Genesis back towards the dining room.

“Sit,” Angeal insisted, guiding Genesis onto a chair in reverse so his shoulder and wing were easily accessible. “Seph, talk to him. I need a closer look at his back.”

Claiming another chair for himself, Sephiroth positioned himself directly in front of Genesis. “Who did this to you?” He asked quietly, keeping his voice soft and gentle.

“Coat off,” Angeal murmured, gently grasping the top of the leather sleeves. Reluctantly, Genesis rotated his arms backwards, hissing in pain as his leather coat slipped over his fresh wounds. It was a small mercy that his wing had ripped through his already sword-sliced coat, at least. His spare coat would be in perfect condition for Wutai… not that he’d even *make it* there at this rate.

“...Hollander...” Genesis eventually admitted, his voice barely audible. He winced as Angeal tried to manipulate his torn undershirt fabric.

“Sorry, Gen,” Angeal grimaced, releasing his grip, “this shirt’s gotta go.”

“No, *stop*-” Genesis starts, his expression melting into panic. “You- you *can’t*-”

He began shifting off the chair to resume another fruitless escape, but was firmly held in place by his two friends.

“Ssh, it’s alright,” Angeal hushed, scissors already at work. “Don’t worry—I’ll buy you another.”

“That’s- that’s not…” Genesis trailed off, exhaustion stealing any further protests he had. All he could do now was slump over the back of the chair in defeat as Angeal carefully cut away the fabric.

It was well and truly over now.

First they’d seen the goddess-forsaken wing, and now, the blasted *degradation*…

Angeal’s frown deepened with concern as he gently spread the fabric away to reveal bare skin. With the lightest of touches, he began dabbing a wet cloth around the wing exit point and shoulder bandages to clean away dried blood. With each movement from Angeal, Genesis whimpered, biting into his cheek to endure the pain.

“Almost done, bud,” the other SOLDIER reassured. Now that the area was clean, Angeal could properly assess the- *wait,* why was the skin around his sword injury practically *necrotic*? He softly pressed the edge of the bandage without thinking. “...what the hell…?”

“*Shit,* Ang-” Genesis yelped, squeezing his eyes shut. “*Don’t.”*

“Ah, damn it- sorry,” Angeal replied, immediately leaning back.

The redhead released a long-suffering sigh, but didn’t elaborate.

Angeal, keeping his hands still now, inspected the wing area with his eyes. The skin was red, puckered and swollen, but thanks to curative magic, was rapidly forming into scar tissue. The only other point of difference were small downy feathers growing amongst the damaged tissue, softening the dramatic contrast of human-flesh-meets-bird-wing.

“Did Hollander experiment on you? Give you too much mako?” Sephiroth enquired, his gaze following Angeal’s as they both examined Genesis’ shoulder and back.

“And did he know your shoulder is *infected?*” Angeal added tersely.

“Yes, no, and… ‘infected’ isn’t the right term,” Genesis replied mumbled into arms, which were folded on the back of the chair. “It’s called *degradation.*”

“Did you consent to said experimentation?” Sephiroth’s tone was darker now, an edge of anger creeping in.

Genesis released a mirthless chuckle and shook his head. “No. Of course not.”

“The *bastard*,” Angeal swore under his breath. Despite Hollander being his and Genesis’ assigned physician, he’d never taken a liking to the man. He had *terrible* bedside manners. “When? And what the *hell* is degradation?”

Angeal’s question was met with silence as Genesis continued to hide his head in his arms. Emotions were roiling inside of him, threatening to burst if he so much as *tried* to speak.

Maybe- *maybe* he could still come back from this.

Angeal’s apartment was sufficiently high enough that maybe, if he threw himself out the window…

“Your wing—can you control it? Sephiroth’s voice, curious like the cat he was, interrupted the redhead’s spiralling thoughts.

Genesis felt self-conscious embarrassment flush his cheeks. He stared at the floor, trying to forget how keenly he felt the alien weight of his wing, the way the feathers would move if he willed them to.

“Haven’t really…cared to try…” he mumbled into his arms.

Compassion softened Angeal’s features. “Why don’t you see if you can unfurl it? Before all the blood and goo dries.”

“Oh, what’s the *point?”* Genesis hissed. Angeal’s request was enough to jolt him backwards, the sheer *ridiculousness* of it shooting liquid anger through his veins. He turned to give the feathers a look of disgust. “I won’t have it for long.”

“You speak with familiarity,” Sephiroth replied. He looked at Genesis with intense concern. “This isn’t the first time, is it?”

“You think Hollander wanted me to brandish this *monstrosity* around the ShinRa building?” Genesis scoffed, unconsciously flattening feathers against his back in shame. “He removed it the first chance he got. To *dissect* it.”

Angeal’s face turned several shades greener. “He *amputated it?*”

Genesis shrugged, trying and failing to appear nonchalant. “...I let him.”

"*Why*?"

"Because then *maybe* I'd pass as *human* for five minutes!" Genesis snarled, eyes flashing with mako energy. "I never expected—or *wanted* — it to come back! And then," he continued, deliberately flicking the feathers this time, "it has the *fucking audacity* to show up in front of you two!"

"Honestly, Gen," Angeal said quietly, "I'm kind of glad it *did*."

Genesis looked at his old friend incredulously. "-the *hell?* Why?"

"You can finally tell us what's going on," Angeal replied, looking to Sephiroth for assurance.

"We're very concerned about you," the General replied softly. "Please, Genesis. Talk to us."

The redhead released a low, keening moan into his arms, fatigue clawing at his consciousness.

A shudder rippled through his body as he suppressed what appeared to be a retch.

"Easy, easy," Angeal murmured, softly rubbing his good shoulder. "Let's finish getting you cleaned up, and we can talk when you're feeling better. How about a drink?"

"Oh, *whatever*…" Genesis moaned listlessly, an otherworldly exhaustion overtaking him. "Why not."

Angeal nodded his head at Sephiroth, who wordlessly procured another dumbapple cider, popped the lid, and handed it to Genesis. The redhead took it, mumbling the barest of 'thank yous' under his breath.

After preparing fresh water and clean towels, Angeal hovered behind Genesis with uncertainty. "Now, do you want to unfurl your wing, or will I?"

Genesis took a grateful gulp of cider. "Be my guest." In truth, he didn't want to even acknowledge his wing, let alone try and make it *move*. The very thought made him feel increasingly ill.

Angeal sighed, but nodded. "Alright then. Might be cold, just so you know."

Genesis merely tipped his head in acknowledgement and busied himself with drinking.

With an abundance of care, his childhood friend took hold of the larger wing joint and slowly stepped backwards, flaring the feathers ever so gently.

“This thing’s huge,” he whispered to himself, awed by the wingspan. Despite the streaks of darkening blood and purple yuckiness, the feathers shimmered in the light. “Beautiful feathers, too.”

Genesis turned his head slightly at the hushed comments, but didn’t respond.

“You right to keep it in this position?” Angeal asked, voice casual. He let go, and Genesis did as he was asked, although not without a grimace to himself.

Sephiroth, feeling oddly out of place, made his way to where Angeal had begun wiping down the feathers.

“May I assist?” He asked, directing his voice to Genesis. The redhead tensed for a moment, as if to refuse, but then shrugged and gave Sephiroth the barest nod of his head.

This was a disaster.

Why was he even letting them *clean* the goddamn thing, anyway?

But then again, Hollander wasn’t going to help him anymore, so amputation was out of the question.

Besides, he *hated* being dirty… and he supposed it *was* covered in blood and ‘birthing juice’ or something just as revolting…

But surely Angeal was insane for using anything like the word ‘beautiful’ to describe it.

He was just being nice.

Genesis knew both he and Sephiroth were horrified.

As his friends manipulated his feathers, Genesis was then struck by the oddest sensation.

Oh, for the love of- why on *Gaia* did their hands feel so *nice*?

Admittedly, it *was* good to feel pleasure instead of pain, but he didn't want to believe anything beneficial could come from having a monster's genetics inside him.

Couldn't even be a nice *pair* of wings, either; having just one, misshapen and strange, just felt like a cruel cosmic joke. Not good for anything other than weighing him down…

"Think we got it all?" Angeal asked, looking at Sephiroth, who nodded back. "How does that feel, Gen?"

Genesis hesitated. The only way he could make that judgment was by *looking* at his wing. He nervously swallowed and focused his energy on foreign muscles. Slowly, he furled it forward and for the first time, truly *looked* at it.

The feathers—*his* feathers—gleamed back at him, glossy and black. His eyes trailed the wing's length, from the downy feathers up top to the rigid and strong primaries below, and while it held some measure of aesthetic beauty, all he could think was one word.

Monster.

"Cleaned up really nice," Angeal noted, hoping to sound encouraging.

"Suits you," Sephiroth added.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?" Genesis growled, his shoulders and wing tensing.

The General coughed awkwardly, trying to find the right words. "What I mean to say is that *matches* you…no, more like-"

"What Seph means," Angeal hurriedly cut in, worried that Genesis would continue to misinterpret Sephiroth, "is that your wing's a beauty. Makes you look incredible."

"It's as he says," Sephiroth agreed. "You put the city ravens to shame."

"Reckon you could fly with it?" Angeal raised an eyebrow. "Seems unlikely, but you never know?"

The question, though well-meaning, hung in silence.

Sephiroth and Angeal exchanged worried glances as Genesis put his head down on the backrest of the chair again, his forehead making a soft '*thunk*' against the wood.

Then, he began to *sob*.

“Gen…?”

Genesis couldn’t form words if he even tried. Instead, all he could manage was breath after shaky breath, tears dripping onto the chair’s coated timber.

Angeal and Sephiroth were being *so bloody nice to him.*

He couldn’t *hide* this shit from them anymore.

Somewhere, on the blurry edges of his breakdown, he felt warm, strong arms encircling him from both sides.

“We’re here for you.” Sephiroth’s voice, low and gentle, somehow cut through the turmoil.

“I… I can’t…” Genesis heaved, trying to regulate his breathing and failing miserably.

Ever since the treatment began, he’d been so *goddamn lonely*.

Forced to bear the burden of degradation, of in-utero experimentation, of *monstrous mutations*, entirely on his own—all so *Hollander* could service his own selfish agenda.

It was *bullshit.*

And he was *done*.

“It’s alright.” He felt the good side of his back being massaged gently. Angeal.

“It’s fucking *not*,” the redhead managed between breaths, his hands grasping his companions desperately. *“*...I’m *dying.”*

He felt Angeal and Sephiroth tense up.

“...degradation?” Sephiroth whispered, his expression ashen.

“Hollander, t-the damn *prick*,” Genesis sobbed, gritting his teeth, “...he genetically experimented on me, before…I was *born.”*

Angeal’s gentle back massage stopped abruptly. He looked at his old friend with panic. “…I’m sorry, *what?*”

"Whatever *shit* they spliced me with...it's *mutating,*" the redhead choked, a shiver rippling through his feathers, "...it's *unravelling."*

Sephiroth felt an icy dread crystallising around his heart from the shock of this information.

If- if *Genesis* was a product of ShinRa's hubris, then *surely* he himself, the child *raised in a lab-*

"But- you were... *born* in *Banora,"* Angeal replied slowly, hands still frozen in time on his friend's clammy back. His face had turned several shades paler.

"*Adopted,*" Genesis spat, damp cheeks now reddening with anger. *"*My '*parents'* were *paid* to raise me."

"And you were manipulated into joining SOLDIER," Sephiroth murmured quietly. "By *me*. ShinRa's *'great war hero'*."

"Take *all* the credit, why don't you," the redhead retorted. He pinned Sephiroth with a glare, but found his animosity rapidly dissolve at the sight of the *guilt* on his rival's—*his friend's*—face.

It wasn't like Sephiroth's origin story was *different* than his own, after all.

Genesis suspected the General knew *something* was up with his own genetics by now, even before such news about the Jenova Project was delivered to him.

"...I wasn't a '*hero*' at fourteen, and I regret ShinRa using my image to manipulate your life further," Sephiroth clarified quietly.

He and Angeal felt Genesis slump down further into the chair in defeat.

"Well, this genetically screwed *monster* certainly is no match for ShinRa's 'great hero' anymore," Genesis lamented, his voice bitter. "Title's all yours."

"*Gen,*" Angeal chastised, both at his friend's antagonism toward Sephiroth and at the self-deprecating language.

"I don't *want* it," Sephiroth spat. "I never have, and I never will."

Genesis merely shook his head into his arms and mumbled, "...why are you rubbing it in?"

He startled when he felt the General's cool hand tightly grip his right bicep. The hold was firm, but not enough to cause pain.

"Genesis, look at me."

Mako-blue eyes, red from tears, met Sephiroth's cat-like gaze with a guarded expression.

"All I ever wanted from my existence was normalcy and companionship," Sephiroth stated, a strange hint of desperation taking hold in his voice. "I found it once, when I was young, if only for the briefest moments. Then, it was ripped away."

Angeal closed his eyes in solemn recollection. He remembered this tale, if only for the sheer fact that Sephiroth hardly ever wanted to dwell on it. The fact he was doing so now for the benefit a friend who constantly goaded him was heroic in itself.

"A time later, I met you and Angeal," Sephiroth continued, "and my world has never been brighter. And now- *now*- you tell me you're *dying*, and... *I can't lose you,* Genesis. Please don't push me away. I care about *you*, not as a rival, but as my *friend."*

The sheer vulnerability on display by Sephiroth was enough to break the chaos of rivalry-fuelled rage swirling viciously in Genesis' degrading mind.

"...I'm sorry," Genesis whispered brokenly, lowering his gaze in shame. And, for the second time in ten minutes, he found himself in the rare situation of being enveloped by Sephiroth's arms.

"Proud of you, Gen," Angeal whispered near his ear as the three friends relaxed into the embrace.

"I don't deserve it, Ang," he replied listlessly, but didn't elaborate. However, a dark, feathery shadow settling around the trio begged to differ as Genesis hesitantly folded his wing around his friends.

"Hmm," his friend contemplated, reaching to brush a hand against the feathers. "Think your wing says otherwise. Makes for a good hug, huh?"

Genesis felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment, and in a gust of feathers, retracted his wing in one graceful motion.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he coughed, pulling back

from the embrace and furiously rubbing the dampness from his eyes.

"Of course not," Sephiroth smirked, sharing an amused glance with Angeal.

Genesis didn't meet their gaze.

"I'm serious. I don't deserve anyone's pride. You have no idea the *shit* Hollander had me agree to," he spat.

"In exchange for what?" Angeal questioned.

"Oh, you know, the cure that would *save my life,*" Genesis snarled. "Bastard held that over my head so I would do as I was told. I was desperate. Angry. Vengeful. *Afraid*. Even I, an expert in manipulation, could be twisted to another's will."

Angeal's gaze softened in comfort. "It's okay."

Genesis snorted. "No, Angeal, it's *not*. Hollander's had it in for ShinRa for decades. All he needed was a weapon, a perfect tool for revenge, and when he discovered what his creation—*my cells*—could do, he..."

The red commander paused, swallowing compulsively from the heat of emotion rising inside him again.

"I was to betray the company, create an army, and bring ShinRa to heel like the dogs they are," Genesis growled, his distaste for both the scientists and the company clear. "All that and more, with the amorphous promise of 'curing me'..."

Both Sephiroth and Angeal wore expressions mixed with horror and betrayal.

"...degradation affects everything, doesn't it," Angeal eventually mumbled, "…even your mind. I can't see you agreeing to something that outlandish otherwise, Gen."

"Ordinarily I'd be mortally offended by that statement," Genesis quipped, looking hurt, "but... yes. Even talking about it with you both makes it seem ridiculous now."

Silence settled between them for a few moments before Sephiroth spoke.

"Genesis, I think your wing manifesting was a blessing.""

The redhead felt himself prickle at this. "How so?"

"Because we can *help* you now," Angeal followed on, compassion softening his expression. "You don't have to do this alone anymore."

Genesis glanced from Angeal to Sephiroth, their genuine concern and willingness to help absolutely shattering any sense of doubt Hollander had tried to manipulate him with.

They loved him, despite *everything*—the wing, the revenge plot, the jealousy, the degradation, the potential for betrayal…

He only hoped that would hold true once he told them *everything else*.

There is no hate, only joy
For you are beloved by the goddess
Hero of the dawn, healer of worlds

~ LOVELESS, Act II ~

Three friends were blessed by the goddess that fateful day.

For through the agony of shared origins, friendship and camaraderie were forged anew.

And soon, the world would be free once more.

End Notes

You guys. This took me so long. I re-wrote the end of this damn thing like 5 times until I learned that in fact, it was already done, it just needed a little nudge of hope at the end because this was never meant to be a multi-chapter disaster. Just a little oneshot leaving you with a hint of how things might be better going forward. :)

Anyhow, I swear my favourite genre of fic is making Genesis suffer terribly but then IMMEDIATELY following it up with a ridiculous amount of love and care from his friends. You can't tell me he was having any sort of GOOD time whilst working out his plan with Hollander, and hey, when a wing's gotta pop, it's gotta pop, even when you don't want it to. :P Also, I like to think of his wing as mostly a physical part of him, with some weird Jenova-magic-esque ability to spawn or disappear occasionally. Got more Genesis wing headcanons on my Tumblr (FeatherLumina) though.

A silly little idea I had in fact was that when Gen's wing emerges in this fic, Hollander is just LOSING HIS MIND in his lab because the amputated wing he was experimenting on just *vanished* into nothingness at the same time. Serves him right. Not your feathers to mess with, mate! XD

Anywho, hope you enjoyed! :D

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